

Council might wait to pick new planning chief

■ Decision could be put off until after elections; no one has yet applied for the job as April 12 deadline draws nearer

BY MARGIE HYSLOP
STAFF WRITER

The County Council may delay naming a new Planning Board chairman until after the November election when voters pick a new council and a new county executive.

In a discussion Tuesday among five of the nine council members, they said they may also extend the April 12 application deadline for the chairman if only one candidate applies.

As of Tuesday, the council had received no applications, although Planning Board Chairman Derick P. Berlage has said he will seek reappointment.

"All options are on the table," said Planning, Housing and Economic Development Committee Chairman Steven A. Silverman (D-At large) of Silver Spring.

Meanwhile, the Planning Board should delay hiring a new planning director to lead the agency's professional staff until the council decides who will be chairman, the council members told Planning Board Executive Director Trudye Morgan Johnson, who attended Tuesday's meeting.

The director of planning has to be able to work with the Planning Board and particularly with the chairman, Silverman said.

"Having somebody come on board and then have a new chair makes no sense at all," he said.

Berlage's term expires June 14, but the law would allow him to continue as chairman until the council makes a decision.

"This is one of the most political decisions that this body will ever

JOB OPENINGS

■ Deadline to apply for Planning Board chairman is April 12. Send application letter, resume and financial statement to the County Council President, 100 Maryland Ave., Rockville, MD 20850.

■ Deadline to apply for director of planning is April 25. For more information, go to www.mncppc.org/jobs and www.pargroupltd.com.

"This should not be a pawn," said Floreen (D-At large) of Garrett Park.

The council's special adviser, Royce C. Hanson, told the council in a memo earlier this month that the "first and most urgent task" in fixing the agency is the selection of a chairman.

Nor should the Planning Board select a planning director until the council picks a chairman, Hanson advised the council.

The planning department needs "bold leadership" to ensure that the largely built-out county is able to adapt to many pressures and changes, he said in the memo.

New leadership is also needed to guide the agency, which Hanson described as "on the verge of becoming dysfunctional."

Fixing the department cannot be left until after the election, Hanson said in his memo.

Hanson, a nationally respected planning expert who was Planning Board chairman from 1972 to 1981, is among about eight people the council has discussed as possible candidates for the chairmanship.

In his memo, Hanson recommended that the chairman appoint and run a committee to conduct an "aggressive national search" for a new planning director.

make," said Silverman, who is running for county executive.

The suggested delays come as the council and Berlage are under pressure to fix longstanding problems exposed at the agency last summer when residents uncovered hundreds of uncaught building violations at the new Clarksburg Town Center.

The problems include inconsistent and missing planning documents and a practice, since discontinued, of allowing planners to approve so-called minor amendments to board-approved plans in private meetings with developers.

What the agency needs "is a damn good manager," said Councilwoman Marilyn J. Praisner (D-Dist. 4) of Calverton.

Councilwoman Nancy M. Floreen said the council should not decide on the chairman just before an election.

Berlage outlined a different process last week in a letter to County Council President George L. Leventhal (D-At large) of Takoma Park.

A search firm hired by the Planning Board to find a planning director is expected to begin interviewing candidates in mid-May, Berlage told Leventhal in his letter.

Councilman Michael J. Knapp also has urged the council to look into a thorough search for a chairman.

Knapp, whose district includes Clarksburg, said he is worried that few applications will be submitted because the public may believe that Berlage again has the "inside track."

Berlage was a county councilman not running for re-election when his colleagues appointed him to head the Planning Board in 2002.

People are not going to apply for the job unless they know they can get approved by the council, Silverman said.